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The Palimpsest

Volume 76 | Number 4

Article 10

10-1-1995

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Recommended Citation

"Two Iowa Soldiers, Two Individual Stories." *The Palimpsest* 76 (1995), 192-193.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol76/iss4/10>

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Two Iowa Soldiers, Two Individual Stories

A world war comprises millions of individual stories. Many are lost as memories fade. Some—often of famous individuals—are preserved in published volumes. Others are tenderly saved in family records. A thick scrapbook with black covers tells one of those individual stories—the brief life and tragic death of Robert (“Bob”) Harwood Shannon, as viewed by his parents who compiled the scrapbook.

Like many a scrapbook, this one begins with a birth announcement and charming boyhood photos of Shannon with his siblings. Soon we see his high school graduation announcement from Washington, Iowa; a fraternity photo; and a 1941 private pilot’s license. We turn a page and suddenly Shannon is in uniform as an air corps cadet in California, posed casually with new buddies or proudly with his family back home. Another page has more pictures of laughing young men in uniform, but the captions are sober-

ing: “Bob (‘Ox’) Johnson, Denison, Iowa, killed in Africa while flying in formation with Bomber Group.” “Roy Oleson, Cedar Falls, Iowa, Killed in Pacific Area.”

On another page, a clipping quotes a letter from another Washington soldier, John C. Jackson: “Will you please convey my thanks to Bob Shannon for helping chase the Germans up here in Tunisia. . . . There’s only one thing down here that reminds me of home and that is that on some days it sounds like an old 4th of July in Washington.”

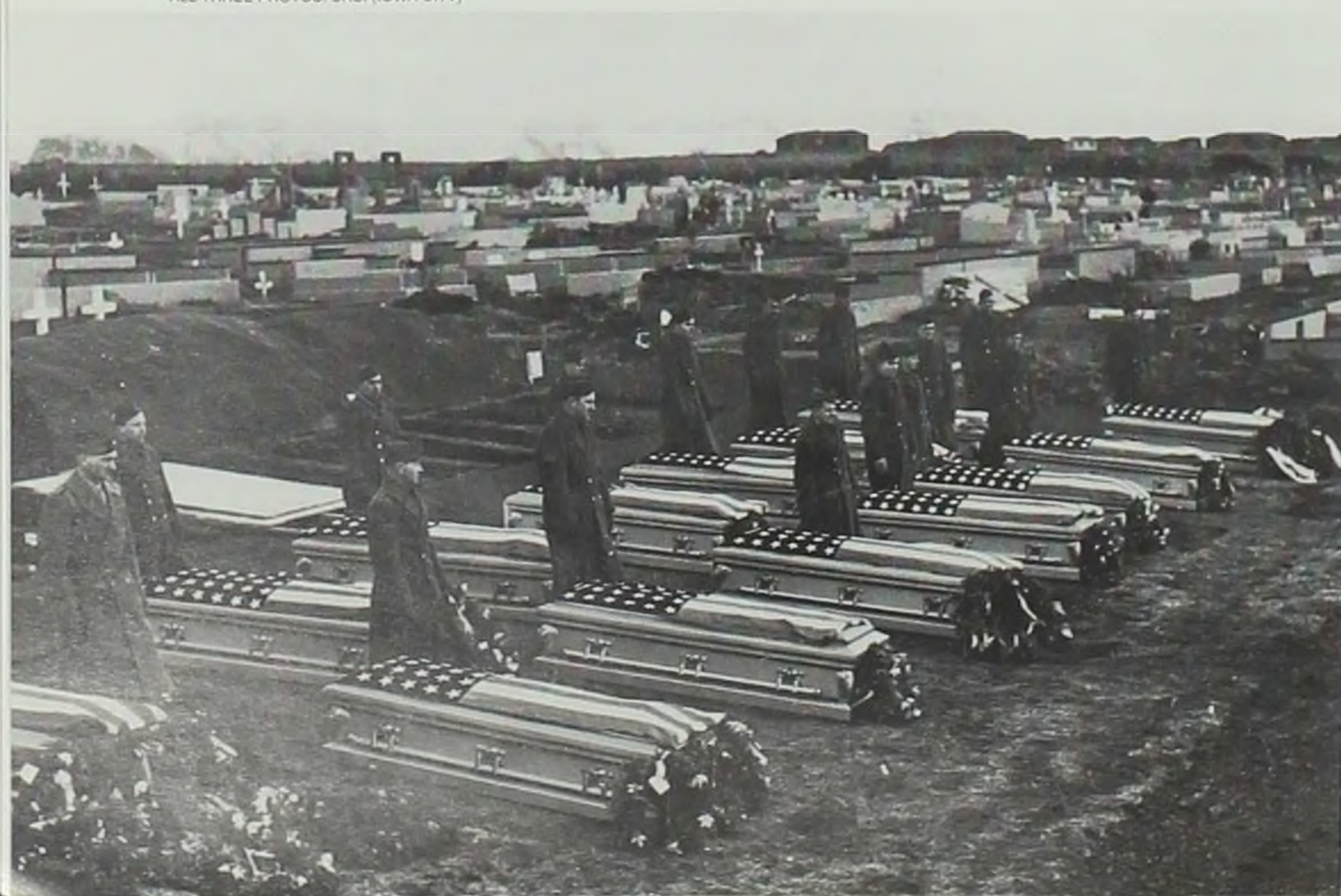
As we leaf through the scrapbook, we see photos of planes, distant shots of them lined up on an airfield or in the air, or disquieting close-ups of flak marks. Official letters of citations and awards are pasted in neatly, telling us that Shannon is building his reputation as a pilot.

Only occasionally do we glimpse the home front: “Why does it have to take something like a World War to let you know how much

you appreciate these brave lads who are risking their lives, their all, for the cause of freedom?” Shannon’s brother, William, asks in a column in the family’s newspaper, the *Washington Evening Journal*, on April 1, 1943.

A scrapbook compiled as a family tribute to Robert Shannon (top left) documents his life, from childhood in Washington, Iowa, to his experiences in the army air corps, to a solemn military funeral in Iceland.

ALL THREE PHOTOS: SHS (IOWA CITY)



The question isn't answered, but pasted onto the next page is the dreaded telegram, and then the cruel headlines: "Bob Shannon in Crash With General Andrews."

Fourteen men died on May 3, 1943, when their plane crashed in bad weather in a remote area of Iceland. On board was Bob Shannon, and also the commanding general of the European Theater of Operations, U.S. Army Lieut. Gen. Frank M. Andrews. The crash made national headlines, and the following pages are filled with dramatic Army Signal Corps photos of the military funeral and burial in Reykjavik. One of the simple wooden crosses bears the name "Robert H. Shannon."

The first half of the scrapbook is devoted to Shannon's life; the second half documents the aftermath of the crash—through local and national clippings; Shannon's father's interview with the single survivor; lists of the 714 "communications" received by the family as condolences. As the grieving shifts, we begin to see Shannon's legacy emerge: news of the Washington, Iowa, YMCA modernizing its community room as a memorial to him; a handful of local donations in his name to the National Jewish Hospital in Denver from people in his hometown; a photo of another little boy (the son of Bob's close friend) whose middle name is "Shannon."

But perhaps the greatest legacy is this "memory book" itself, compiled by Shannon's family and recently donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa so that Shannon's story can be available for the public, for researchers, and for posterity. In a final few pages of tributes, someone named Bye Patterson Laffer of Ft. Dodge remarked about Robert Shannon: "He has written history." The scrapbook and its permanent home at the State Historical Society ensure that.

Another recent donation to the State Historical Society is a scrapbook documenting the Pacific Theater from the perspective of Staff Sergeant John R. Reilly of Hampton, Iowa. Reilly



From the Reilly scrapbook: Reilly holds headlines of Roosevelt's 1944 re-election ("Again, Again, & Again").

was a U.S. Marine Corps "combat correspondent." "These correspondents are young and tried reporters, eager to fight as well as to write, who have been selected from the newspapers, news services and radio stations over the nations," a 1942 clipping explains. "They are true Leathernecks, and for them the portable typewriter is an auxiliary and special weapon." Most of these "fighter-reporters" completed eight weeks of "training and hardening" at Fort Parris and then two weeks of policy and procedures training in Washington, D.C.

The scrapbook is filled with newspaper clippings and photos of Guam, Saipan, Tinian, and Reilly's later work in bond drives. His detailed account of the First Marine Brigade taking Orote Peninsula records the danger step by step: "Our platoon followed tank three. We watched the trees for snipers; we watched for fire lanes and pillboxes. We were clawing at the vitals of enemy opposition."

The Shannon and Reilly scrapbooks represent small collections in the State Historical Society of Iowa. Yet their portrayal of individual lives and ordinary communities caught up in World War II helps fill in the details and develop broad pictures of an extraordinary time in world history.

—The Editor